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SUBJECT: BURMA'S FORESTRY MINISTER TAKES A MEETING

REF: A. BANGKOK 2448

1B. BANGKOK 1804

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (SBU) Summary: In the COM's first meeting with Burma's Forestry Minister we were able to finally get the GOB's official line on wildlife trafficking and illegal timbering, and clarify an outstanding rumor regarding the punishment of a Ministry official for illegal contact with the Embassy. Though the Minister did not seem particularly engaged, conservation NGOs tell us he is pretty good on the important issues. Perhaps Burma's protected, but neglected, regions will benefit. End summary.

From the Woodwork

12. (SBU) After waiting nearly four months for a response to our meeting request, the Minister of Forestry agreed with less than a day's notice to meet the Chief of Mission (COM) on May 21st. There was no explanation for the delay or why the Minister was willing to meet now, in the midst of the reconvening of the National Constitutional Convention.

13. (SBU) Minister Brigadier General Thein Aung took office in August 2003. He is a major political player, holding a position on the Central Executive Committee of the SPDC's mass-action group, the Union Solidarity and Development Association. Before his promotion he was a Deputy Energy Minister. Minister Brig Gen Thein Aung took over a month after the forced retirement of his predecessor U Aung Phone -- reportedly sacked for particularly egregious corruption. U Aung Phone has also been tied in the international press to the scandal surrounding the Iraqi Oil-for-Food program -- though undoubtedly this had no impact on his removal.

A Man of Few Words

14. (SBU) During the meeting, the COM covered the scope of environmental issues here. She noted the Forestry Ministry's cooperation in recent months with the Smithsonian and California Academy of Sciences for an annual wild elephant survey, with a consortium led by Total and UNOCAL to set aside for protection a large swath of land around their natural gas pipeline in southeastern Burma, and with U.S. conservation NGO Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). WCS is the implementing partner in a newly announced 4,800 square mile tiger preserve in northwest Burma. The COM also queried the Minister about Burma's problems with illegal and unsustainable logging and with trafficking of wildlife over the Chinese border.

15. (SBU) The Minister was quite reticent and did not seem overly pleased to see us. He accepted the COM's comments with a nod and answered her questions with pat explanations of "improved cooperation" within the ministries and with Thai and Chinese government officials to cut down on the export of illegal timber and endangered species. He pointed to the capture by the army of "100 logging trucks" near the Chinese border as evidence of the GOB's serious efforts. Nonetheless, reftels and other reports published in recent months by conservation NGOs and scientists in China's Yunnan Province point out the continued magnitude of both timber and wildlife trafficking from Burma to China and Thailand.

16. (SBU) The Minister did explain that Prime Minister Khin Nyunt (known for his relatively pro-conservation tendencies) had established a new committee on environmental conservation under the chairmanship of Foreign Minister U Win Aung. The committee is now working on reforestation projects in Pegu Yoma (a heavily timbered region north of Rangoon) and on income generation and education programs among populations resident in or alongside protected areas. Both of these campaigns, the Minister said pointedly, were sorely in need of international or INGO financial and technical assistance.

Forestry Official Faces the Music

17. (C) The Minister became slightly more animated when the COM asked for clarification of a February report from the Democratic Voice of Burma that a Forestry Ministry official

had been sentenced to death for transmitting sensitive documents to the U.S. Embassy. The Minister verified that indeed an official, U Sann Min, had been arrested after the post office intercepted unspecified documents he was mailing to the Embassy. He said, however, that he had no knowledge of U Sann Min's sentence. The COM stressed that the Embassy had no knowledge of this incident and certainly had not been soliciting classified materials from any Forestry Ministry officials. The Minister took this on board without comment.

National Convention? What National Convention?

18. (C) Seeking a top political operator's view of the newly reconvened National Convention, the COM asked about the Convention's recent discussions on the future of the country's conservation, forestry, and ecotourism policies. The transcript of these deliberations had taken up dozens of column-inches in the May 20th New Light of Myanmar newspaper. The Minister seemed completely puzzled by this question and moved on to something else.

Comment: Prospects are Positive

19. (C) Despite a perfunctory performance in the meeting, the Minister's attitude toward conservation has received relatively high marks by conservation NGOs in Rangoon. Perhaps this is just in comparison to his notoriously corrupt predecessor, who focused all his attention on the income generating side of the Ministry (timbering) at the expense of conservation projects. Though these projects, and Burma's protected areas, continue to suffer from a lack of human and financial resources, perhaps with a more conservation-focused Minister and Prime Minister in place, and with new sources of private funding coming online (for instance from Total and WCS), the future for Burma's protected areas may be a bit brighter. End comment.
Martinez